DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 240 826 FL 013 974

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TITLE Intermediate ESL Composition: The Use of Specific Detail and the Point Paragraph Outline.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT American Language Journal; v1 n1 p25-40 Fall 1982

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Course Descriptions; Course Organization; *English (Second Language); *Paragraph Composition; *Prewriting; *Second Language Instruction; Sentence Combining; Sentence Structure; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition); Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

A curriculum for intermediate composition for students of English as a second language is presented based on the use of levels of specificity as an organizing principle. The course objective is for students to write well-planned, coherent paragraphs acceptable to the American academic audience, within limited formats. Two additional fundamentals guiding a student's efforts are to write what he knows about, and to write for an audience. The first part of the course is devoted to the identification of the paragraph topic and the narrowing of broad subjects to manageable topics. Then students are introduced to the concept of the topic sentence. Following extended work with student-generated paragraphs, students begin to plan original paragraphs about assigned or student-selected topics. When students can clearly demonstrate that they understand the necessity of using specific detail in paragraph writing, the focus turns to the arrangement of detail in acceptable academic paragraph form, later using the technique of writing the same material in various paragraph formats to compare organizing methods. Cause-and-effect paragraphs are also used as an alternative form. Sample exercises are provided for each course segment and concept. (MSE)

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THE AMERICAN LANGUAGE JOURNAL
vol I no 1 Fall 1982

Intermediate ESL Composition: The Use of Specific Detail and the Point Paragraph Outline

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Joy M. Reid

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For many ESL composition students, using the specific detail necessary for successful academic writing is difficult. Like many native-speaker "basic writers" (Shaughnessy 1977), they produce generalization after generalization with inadequate support. Such writing does not meet the expectations of the academic audience which demands explanation, detail, and proof for general statements. Some of the reasons for this problem are feeling of inadequacy about English structures, limited ability to express thoughts in writing, and only minimal awareness of audience expectations. In addition, however, second-language speakers are often bound by the techniques they practice in their cultures in the presentation of written material. Communication barriers that result from cultural differences include beliefs that personal authority and integrity are far superior to enumerated specific detail, that elaborate explanations of extenuating circumstances are preferable to extended use of data, and that indirect references are more mature and sophisticated than the direct use of supportive material. In verbal communication, these cross-cultural differences can be resolved by further communication; however, written work lacks both immediacy and personal touch. Therefore, if international students apply their different cultural strategies to the presentation of written material, they may fail to communicate effectively with the American academic audience.

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How does the ESL composition teacher prepare international students to write clear, appropriately supported prose that will fulfill the expectations of their future U.S. professors? Certainly the initial barriers of reluctance to write and problems with English structures can be diminished by

studying the forms and by practicing. The same is true of the use of specific detail; students can be encouraged to practice writing according to a limited organizational form which will result in successful paragraphs. In the intermediate composition curriculum that follows, Christensen's levels of specificity (1978) form the basis for the organizational formats. As the students of intermediate language proficiency study and practice these formats, they are, of course, also practicing sentence structures (particularly the use of dependent and independent clauses) and sentence combining, individualized grammar and spelling work, and the use of appropriate connectors. Moreover, they follow the two fundamentals of the course: write about what you know about, and always write for an audience. The part of the curriculum discussed below does not dwell on these aspects, but they are also integral to the course.

Students enter the intermediate level with an understanding of what a paragraph looks like, with the knowledge that a paragraph is about one idea, and that this main idea is usually stated in the first sentence of the paragraph. They have already had some work in distinguishing general from specific words, phrases, and sentences, and they have a basic knowledge of English sentence structures.

The first part of the course is devoted to the identification of the topic or main idea of paragraphs and the narrowing of subjects (large areas of interest) to topics (areas of interest small enough to be explained, defined, and illustrated in a single paragraph). This narrowing process allows for a review of levels of generality/specificity, particularly if such work is done on the board with "word trees" (Harshbarger 1981).

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Read the following paragraph. Select the best topic for that paragraph.

Market Day in Oaxaco, Mexico is very interesting. The Indians walk to the city with many colorful things to sell. There are beautiful baskets, colorful clothes and hand-made dolls to be sold or traded. The market is always crowded, and the air is filled with the aroma of roasting corn, peanuts, and many exotic foods. The tourist may join in the spirited bargaining or merely sit and watch the colorful Oaxacan marketplace.

a. shopping in Oaxaco
b. tourism in Mexico
c. the Oaxaca market

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Write three topics for each of the subjects below. Then choose one of the topics and construct three more specific topics.

Next, students are introduced to the concept of the topic sentence, the most general sentence in the paragraph. The functions of the topic sentence are thoroughly discussed: it introduces the topic to the reader, focuses the topic, and unifies the material that follows. In addition, most topic sentences can be classified as either statements of opinion (which use judgmental words: beautiful, easy, worse than) or statements of intent (which objectively identify what will follow). Finally, topic sentences contain controlling ideas, words or phrases about which questions can be asked; the answers to these questions generate data that will result

in specific detail. Student-generated paragraphs from previous classes can be used as exercises that will be interesting and valuable for the students, and just as important, the students will be able to imitate them.

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Read the topic sentences below. Identify them as either a statement of opinion or a statement of intent. Then circle the controlling ideas in each topic sentence.

1. A pharmacist has two major responsibilities. _____
2. Women in the U.S.S.R. have more problems than men. _____
3. Living in Florida is better than living in New York. _____

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Read the topic sentences below. Then write questions that you would expect to be answered in the paragraph that follows each topic sentence.

1. A trip through the jungles in southeastern Mexico can be very educational.

   Questions: _____
   _____
   _____

2. Tennis is a sport which is both physically and psychologically satisfying.

   Questions: _____
   _____
   _____

3. For many people, colors have certain meanings.

Questions:_____

_____

_____

Following extended work with student-generated paragraphs, the intermediate students should begin to plan original paragraphs, either about assigned topics or about topics they choose themselves.

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Choose one of the topics below (or a topic of your own) and follow the process for constructing a paragraph.

Suggested subjects: politics, movies, pets — choose one

Narrowed topic:_____

Topic Sentence:_____

_____

Questions and answers about the controlling ideas in the topic sentence:_____

_____

_____

What technique(s) of support will you use to substantiate the topic sentence: facts? examples? physical description? personal experience?_____

When the students can clearly demonstrate that they understand the necessity of using specific detail in paragraph writing, the focus of the class can turn to the heart

of the instruction, the arrangement of such detail in acceptable academic paragraph form. Christensen's paragraph outline, in its most basic form, has 11 "points":

TOPIC SENTENCE ——————→ most general
A. Point 1 ——————→ more specific
1.
2. } specific detail to support Point 1 → most specific

B. Point 2
1.
2. } specific detail supporting Point 2

C. Point 3
1.
2. } specific detail supporting Point 3

CONCLUDING SENTENCE

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Below is a paragraph followed by an outline form. Read the paragraph; then complete the outline.

For breakfast, my family and I usually eat as we did in South Vietnam; in Asia, breakfast is the principal meal of the day. We begin with steamed or fried rice served with a fried egg. For the main dishes we have meat boiled with soy sauce and soup which is cooked with chicken, pork, and vegetables. After eating, we usually have hot tea and sometimes coffee as well. After a long night, breakfast gives us much energy so that we can work all day until the evening.

My Nguyen
South Vietnam

TOPIC SENTENCE _____

A.
1.
2.
B.
1.
2.
C.
1.
2.

CONCLUDING SENTENCE _____

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Outline the following paragraph.

The tourist in Cairo will later remember the smells of the city. In the early morning, for example, he will remember walking through the coffee shops and smelling the coffee beans being ground; later in the day the smell of brewing coffee floats out of the shops. The spice market, too, has many memorable smells: first, the overwhelming smell of all the spices together as he enters the shop, and then the individual smell of special spices—cardamon, cinnamon, and ginger. Finally, the smells of the Nile River become a part of the tourist's life. In the early morning, the mist is filled with the odor of fresh fish, while later in the day, the smell of cooked fish in riverside restaurants tempts the tourist to eat. For years after he has left Cairo, the tourist will recall these smells whenever he encounters strong coffee, a bakery, or fish in the supermarket.

James Griswold
U.S.

TOPIC SENTENCE:_____

A.
1.
2.

B.
1.
2.

C.
1.
2.

CONCLUDING SENTENCE:_____

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Use the 11-point paragraph outline below to write a paragraph. Combine sentences when appropriate and use connectors when necessary.

TOPIC SENTENCE: Palestine is a fascinating country because of its natural beauty, its excellent weather, and its geographical location.

A. natural beauty
   1. beaches of the Mediterranean Sea have yellow sand beside the blue water.
   2. many beautiful mountains covered with green grass and trees.

B. excellent weather
   1. most of the year the sun shines gently but the temperature is quite moderate.
   2. even in the cool rainy season, the weather is pleasant.

C. geographic location
   1. with Egypt on the south and the Mediterranean Sea on the west, Palestine is very attractive for tourists.
   2. with Lebanon on the east and Jordan on the north, many different cultures are easily available.

CONCLUDING SENTENCE: All these factors make Palestine appealing for the natives and for visitors.

Mohammed El-Helou
Palestine

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Write an 11-point outline for each of the following topic sentences.

1. Before I came to the U.S. to study, three people gave me good advice.
2. Although my parents' house looks quite ordinary from the outside, inside it is very beautiful.
3. When I am lonely, I do three things.

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Choose a subject below (or choose your own subject). Narrow that subject to a topic, construct a tentative topic sentence with controlling ideas, and then ask questions about that topic sentence which you will answer in the paragraph that follows. Then write an 11-point outline.

TOPICS: superstitions in my country
ways to improve my apartment
how to pass the TOEFL

After the students have learned to control the 11-point paragraph outline, they need to learn to expand the outline (and its use), not by broadening the topic sentence, but by:

1. *always* adding more specific detail
2. *often* adding one or more "points" to the outline
3. *sometimes* changing the topic sentence slightly

The comparison-contrast paragraph is an excellent place to demonstrate an "alternative" form of the outline; students can learn to organize identical material in two separate but equal ways, and later to choose one form over the other according to their audience, the assignment, and the available material.

SAMPLE EXERCISE

Each of the comparison-contrast paragraph outlines below is organized differently. Decide which outline form each follows, and then write the same material in the opposite form.

Topic sentence: I prefer travelling by ship to travelling by plane.

A. The longer time is more restful than an airplane trip.
(Ship) A. A change of pace from my daily life.
(Plane) B. Hurried just like my daily life.

B. It's an interesting way to spend time.
(Ship) A. Swimming, playing games
(Plane) B. Sitting, reading.

C. The variety of people is entertaining.
(Ship) A. Meeting many different people.
(Plane) B. One seatmate, perhaps.

For all these reasons, if I had a choice, I would travel by ship.

Najah Al-Kazemi
(Kuwait)

Topic sentence: Studying English with a private tutor is more helpful than studying in an English class.

A. Studying with a private tutor.
   (Rate of learning) 1. Students have the opportunity to assimilate information at their own pace.
   (Participation) 2. Students participate orally at least half of each class.
   (Goals) 3. Students can make and achieve individual goals.

B. Studying in an English class.
   (Rate of learning) 1. Students must progress at the rate of the class.
   (Participation) 2. Students may be able to participate only a small percentage of the class.
   (Goals) 3. Students must accept class goals.

After investigating the advantages above, I have decided to stop taking English classes and hire a private tutor.

Iara Wrege
(Brazil)

Another way of manipulating the point paragraph outline can be taught with cause-effect paragraph development. Such paragraphs often require extended specific detail, and students can practice expanding first their cause-effect paragraphs and then other paragraphs they have previously written in the course.

SAMPLE EXERCISE

In the cause-effect point outline below, the specific detail has been expanded while the number of points have been reduced. Look at the outline: does it describe causes or effects? What additional detail could you suggest to strengthen the author's argument?

TOPIC SENTENCE: Transportation in Fort Collins is inadequate for those people who do not own a car.

1. public transportation
   - A. very few buses
     - (1) always crowded
     - (2) rarely on time
     - (3) limited schedule
   - B. very few taxis
     - (1) only available from 7-6
     - (2) very expensive
2. private transportation
   - A. bicycles
     - (1) inadequate bicycle lanes
     - (2) danger on main streets
   - B. on foot
     - (1) inefficient in a large town
     - (2) difficult in inclement weather

The solution to these problems is simple: if you don't own a car, don't come to Fort Collins!

Jose Andrade
Venezuela

During the final weeks of the intermediate course, students can try to construct multiple paragraphs (the "body paragraphs" of essays) by:

1. writing three paragraphs about the same topic. For example, students might write three paragraphs about things that happened to them in the U.S. during their first week that made them angry, happy, or sad. These explanation paragraphs would probably have 11-point outlines.
2. dividing a comparison-contrast paragraph in two and adjusting the topic sentences accordingly. Particularly if a student has written a paragraph that contains both comparison and contrast elements, he might split the paragraph; this would entail making the original topic sentence into two topic sentences and constructing an 11-point outline or an alternative outline for both topic sentences.
3. using the points in an 11-point outline as the topic sentences for three paragraphs, and constructing paragraph outlines for each. An example of this method of expanding a single paragraph to multiple paragraphs follows.

11-Point Paragraph Outline

When I think about returning to Buenos Aires, I get very apprehensive because of the problems I will face there.

A. politics are unstable
   1. frequent changes of government
   2. insecurity of the population
B. inflationary economy
   1. personal results
   2. public results
C. many problems of most big cities
   1. crowding
   2. pollution

For all of these reasons, I am dreading my return to Buenos Aires.

Ani Sala
Argentina

Multiple Paragraph Outline

When I think about returning to Buenos Aires, I get very apprehensive because of the problems I will face there. (overall topic sentence)

First, politically, Buenos Aires, like the entire country of Argentina, is very unstable.

A. frequent changes of government
   1. how many in recent years? (facts and
   2. why? examples needed)
B. changes in political philosophy
   1. what kinds? (facts and personal ex-
   2. fear of political reprisals periences needed)
C. result: insecurity of the population
   1. much unemployment (facts and
   2. fear of political reprisals (examples needed)

Another problem is the highly inflationary economy in Buenos Aires.

A. description of inflation
   1. how much? (facts needed)
   2. in what period of time?
B. personal results
   1. saving is useless (facts and personal ex-
   2. can't afford to buy much perience needed)
C. public results
   1. dissatisfaction and despair (physical descrip-
   2. higher crime rates tion and facts needed)

Finally, Buenos Aires has all the problems of most big cities that make living there unpleasant.

A. crowding
   1. population vs. space (physical description and facts needed)
   2. traffic jams
B. housing
   1. inadequate (examples and facts needed)
   2. expensive
C. pollution
   1. industrial (physical description and personal experience needed)
   2. noise

For all of these reasons, I am dreading my return to Buenos Aires. (overall concluding sentence)

At the conclusion of this intermediate course, the students should be able to write well-planned, coherent paragraphs that are acceptable to an American academic audience. Certainly the form is extremely limited; the students do not learn all formats of prose available to the university writer. But they do learn to produce what Suzanne Jacobs (1981) calls the "certain flow of information. . .that any reader conditioned by literary custom expects to hear." The students, by working through a variety of strategies and data-generating techniques, will be able to write "reader based prose" which is a "deliberate attempt to communicate something to a reader" (Flower 1981). Being confident in their ability to organize material, students can then "engage in the issues they are writing about" (Sommers 1982). In fact, a typical response at the end of the class from international students who were initially mystified about "what the professors want" is "This is easy—why didn't someone tell us about this before?"

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